

# At Ellis Island Museum, Dispute on Armenia Show

## Massacre Photographs Deemed 'Too Gory'

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

For Armenians, a massacre of their compatriots at the hands of the Ottoman Turks more than 80 years ago is a watershed event in the history of their diaspora.

So two weeks ago, when officials at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum asked the organizer of an Armenian immigration exhibit to remove photographs considered "gruesome and gory" — along with explanatory text — the show's curators denounced it as censorship.

"I want to present the facts as it happened," said Margaret Tellalian Kyrkostas, who organized the show, "Armenia: Memories from my Home."

"That's why I don't understand why they are censoring us," she said.

The National Parks Service, which runs the museum, denies that censorship was involved. Manny Strumpf, a spokesman for the service, said museum officials did not excise mentions of the massacre. They called on the curator to condense the long passages of text and to remove some photographs — of decapitated heads and public hangings, for example — that would be inappropriate for some of the one million people, many of whom are children, who visit the museum each year, he said.

"In the judgment of the superintendent's office, they were too gory and gruesome for the types of audiences we get," said Mr. Strumpf. He said that several other images and descriptions of the massacre remain. "The content was not changed, and the photographs and text do cover the massacre."

Controversies about how to exhibit a nation or a community's past are not new. Two years ago, conservatives attacked the Smithsonian Institution's exhibition marking the 50-year anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima as overly sympathetic to critics of the bombing. A year later, the Library of Congress closed a show on slavery after receiving complaints from many black staff members. More recently, there was controversy at a Holocaust memorial in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, over whether it should include Nazi persecution of gays.

"They are not new, but they are relatively recent," said Neil Harris, a professor of history at the University of Chicago, who has written about museum history. "This country has lots of groups which are contesting over historical interpretation, over fights about textbooks,

over types of courses."

Joyce Appleby, a professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles and the president of the American Historical Association, said she welcomed the collapse of what was once considered to be rigid standards of decorum in American museums.

"They are more contested spaces now, because there are many more people who feel they have a right to say something about it," Professor Appleby said. "The audience today includes more disputed, more contested points of view and many more people who feel comfortable entering into these debates and many fewer suppressed voices."

The question of whose version of history should prevail has now arrived on the doorsteps of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, where the exhibit, which opened last weekend, is to run until February 1998.

Some historians and the Turkish Government have disputed claims of an organized genocide and the numbers of Armenians killed.

Ms. Kyrkostas said that museum officials asked her to remove 15 photographs, including shots of Turkish soldiers displaying decapitated heads and a picture of a couple who were hanged. She said she was also asked to take out written explanations of the killings.

"In 1915, a well planned genocide began," reads one of the removed passages describing the killing of Armenian men. "The men were never seen again: they were killed at the first opportunity. The women, children and elderly continued alone to misery and death."

Without the photographs and the text, Ms. Kyrkostas said, visitors to the museum will not properly understand the massacre.

But Mr. Strumpf said that the museum's deputy superintendent, Lawrence Steeler, simply recommended "shorter quotes to grab the attention of the public."

As for the photos, Mr. Strumpf said, officials asked that only the most unpleasant of them be removed, and that it did not diminish the scope or the horror of the massacre.

Some Armenians, however, contend that the gruesome details of their past ought not to be whitewashed in any exhibition on Armenian history. "Should we pretty history up so it does not upset sensitivities?" said Hratch Zadoian, an assistant provost and a political science professor at Queens College.